DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 306 CS 504 583

AUTHOR Trank, Douglas M.
TITLE An Overview of Present Approaches to the Basic Speech Communication Course.
PUB DATE 12 Nov 83
NOTE 18p. ; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (69th, Washington, DC, November 10-13, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Content; Curriculum Development; Curriculum Enrichment; Curriculum Evaluation; Educational Philosophy; Higher Education; *Research Methodology; *Speech Communication; *Speech Curriculum; *Speech Instruction

ABSTRACT

Recent surveys have shown that the basic speech communication course, designed to introduce students to the discipline and to meet their basic proficiency needs, is alive and growing rapidly. While this is generally good news, a more critical examination reveals a variety of issues in need of resolution. A significant amount of course time is given to public speaking and related topics, with little variation. The dominant course pattern involves a single, nearly autonomous instructor teaching each class. The surveys have noted that in recent years there has been a shift toward more communication-oriented, less public-speaking focused classes and toward staffing with graduate assistants and junior faculty. The surveys have not, however, provided much information on the importance of communication courses to institutions or to a liberal arts education. Faculty attitudes toward the basic course show a fundamental lack of interest, and there is little information on the philosophy behind content and approaches. Even the most drastic criticisms have failed to create change, partly because the basic course fulfills certain traditional obligations that other courses, departments, and instructors are not anxious to add to their responsibilities, and partly because few departments are able to support and initiate radical changes in their approach to the basic course. The paper concludes with six suggestions for bringirg about meaningful revision to the basic course: (1) frequent regional and national surveys need to be conducted, (2) the speech communication discipline and departments need to reestablish their commitment to the basic course, (3) curriculum decisions need to be based on valid educational goals and research, (4) basic course directors should be given increased support to experiment, (5) publishers and authors should be encouraged to provide innovative materials, and (6) alternative approaches to the basic course should be closely examined. (CRH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED244306

AN OVERVIEW OF PRESENT APPROACHES TO THE BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION COURSE

Douglas M. Trank
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52242

Speech Communication Association Convention
Washington, D.C.
November 12, 1983

Abstract: The major conclusions of the several basic course surveys completed the past two decades are summarized. While we have been able to identify categories of approaches these surveys seldom get to the crucial issues which lead to those approaches and frequently report the data in unsatisfactory form. Departmental decisions and a lack of interest from the speech communication discipline have inhibited significant experimentation and change in the basic course. Unrealistic demands on basic course directors have frequently precluded changes in approach, and a lack of significant research in the basic course has left us with few alternatives. Publishers and basic textbook authors have also discouraged significant experimentation with alternative approaches. Several suggestions concerning future approaches to the basic course are offered.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Douglas M. Trank
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 583

AN OVERVIEW OF PRESENT APPROACHES TO THE BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION COURSE

Dozens of surveys over the past decade have provided considerable evidence of the variety of approaches to the basic speech communication course. The traditional Midwest Basic Course Directors Conference, various regional basic course conferences, and state, regional and national convention programs provide additional information about the status of the basic course. According to nearly all of these sources, the basic course is alive, well and growing more rapidly than general departmental, college or university enrollment.[1] That is good news for most of us, I assume, since the basic course performs a variety of important functions in most communication departments. A more critical examination of these surveys and the basic courses they reflect, however, presents a variety of issues which ought to be discussed by faculty across our discipline. Several of these concerns will be identified as I attempt to provide an overview of what we do know about various approaches to the basic course.

A Practical View: What The Surveys Tell Us

A summary of existing reviews provides a number of interesting views and identifies trends in basic course instructional approaches. Most basic courses in speech communication continue to share two fundamental goals: to introduce students to the discipline of speech communication and to meet basic communication proficiency needs.[2] The approaches the majority of institutions take to accomplish those goals have not varied dramatically in the past two decades. The 1973

national basic course survey sponsored by the Speech Communication Association did, however, identify some interesting shifts in approach. The authors claimed that fewer courses "were emphasizing public speaking, fundamentals, and voice and articulation."[3] More courses were "emphasizing other aspects of communication and a multiple approach."[4] Regardless of the "emphasis" of the approach to the basic course, the data clearly showed that most courses continued to devote significant amounts of time to public speaking and related topics. The dominant instructional pattern ten years ago remained as it has for centuries: "a single instructor teaching each class with a great deal of autonomy, doing most of his (her) own grading and making up his (her) own written exams."[5]

This perceived but poorly documented shift toward the teaching of more communication-oriented and less public speaking oriented courses was evidently reversed by the time SCA sponsored the third national survey in 1979:

> "substantially more schools presently follow a public speaking orientation than they did in 1974. This shift was at the expense of such orientations as communication and fundamentals, while the multiple or combination thrust remained nearly constant."[6]

A second clear shift documented by this survey was an emerging pattern of staffing the basic course with graduate teaching assistants and junior faculty.[7] These generalizations, along with the others provided by basic course surveys, are interesting and informative--but not very helpful in resolving the issues which led to or result from some of the identified shifts in approach.

A Philosophical View: What the Surveys Fail To Tell Us

The surveys demonstrate that the percentage of institutions, and schools within those institutions, requiring the basic speech communication course fluctuates from year to year. They also indicate what percentage of schools follow a certain approach and what percentage of time is devoted to particular activities and topics. They fail to give us much information, however, about the philosophical and/or educational bases on which institutions make such decisions. Is the basic course viewed as a university-wide service course, as an important central element in the undergraduate Liberal Arts curriculum, or as something between these two extremes? To what extent does a particular philosophy determine the content and approach of the course? More importantly, in some situations, how does the communication faculty view the basic course--is it central to departmental offerings, a course everyone teaches, or one which most faculty try to avoid? The attitudes of colleagues within the department and across disciplines can have a dramatic effect on the content and approach of the basic course. These issues, however, are seldom discussed outside informal conversations at conferences and conventions.

The surveys also indicate that some basic courses emphasize theory while others concentrate on performance. Again, however, they give few clues as to the motivation for particular approaches. As educators, we should hope that such decisions are based on student needs and a sound research base. The numerous surveys are of little help here. While they do aid departments in establishing parameters of generally acceptable basic course content, they do not, as Pearson and Sorenson

contend, address the central issue of student need. Pearson and Sorenson further argue that students and alumni clearly recommend the combination or hybrid approach to the basic course over the public speaking approach, while disconcertedly noting that the percentage of institutions employing the public speaking approach has been increasing.[8]

While these surveys generally promise nothing more than a report on the current nature and instructional approach of the basic course, they probably have an significant impact on decisions we make about our own basic courses. That is unfortunate and, in some cases, dangerous. The 1980 SCA survey, which is generally acknowledged to be the most comprehensive and valuable of such studies, draws its conclusions from a less than 20% response to the questionnaire and offers little indication of the representativeness of its sample. Greenstreet is more specific in his criticism of the instrument and the report:

> The 1980 report, however, is not particularly useful for course directors. It does not report data for particular types of institutions nor is it comparable to previous studies. The instrument is weighted toward the public speaking orientation, particularly as it seeks identification of the types of topics and activities which characterize the course. Most important, there is no apparent concern to assure the sample from which data is drawn is representative. It is this last omission which most seriously undermines any attempt to compare data across time or to accept data as representative.[9]

His criticism seems appropriate for other, similar surveys, although none of these reports should have to accept the responsibility for

determining the content of the basic course in situations where educators are more concerned with being the mainstream of current practice than in meeting valid educational goals and realistic student needs.

Finally, none of these surveys have been of much value in predicting important shifts or trends in approaches to the basic course. The extensive use of undergraduate students to teach and assist in the basic course is clearly the most significant recent change in staffing and administration. Alternative approaches such as the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) have not been reported as significant departures from traditional approaches; the surveys, in fact, typically discourage responses outside traditional categories. The obvious conclusion is that either the surveys are not able to identify such trends or the researchers do not view such potential shifts as significant enough to warrant discussion.

A Realistic View: What We Can Expect in the Future

Over a decade ago, Mehrley and Backes argued that "the first college and university course in speech should be revolutionized" and that it should be a "total, drastic, highly accelerated pace of change."[10] The basic course has never wanted for lack of criticism but it has shown a remarkable immunity to that criticism and a singular aversion to change. Even contentions that what we do in the basic course is "more appropriate for achieving a Boy Scout's merit badge in public speaking than earning three hours of college credit"[11] have done little to encourage alternative approaches to the basic course.

Approaches to the basic course have enjoyed short diversionary trips as most of us moved to embrace the term "communication," as some of us welcomed interpersonal communication with an almost zealous fanaticism, and as many of us attempted some sort of expansion to encompass other forms and functions of human communication to compliment public speaking. But recent surveys conclude we are moving back toward a public speaking emphasis with a traditional, albeit a younger and less experienced, delivery system.

The basic course we see identified in current surveys will remain the same for the foreseeable future. Some programs will continue to experiment with innovative approaches, with different emphases and content, and with alternative delivery systems. But for most of the thousands of colleges and universities which offer a basic course it will continue to be, in spite of a lack of meaningful supportive data and in the face of legitimate criticism, business as usual. An examination of the relevant factions with an interest in or control over the basic course supports this prognosis.

Departmental decisions about the basic course consistently avoid significant change. The typical departmental view of the basic course as either an introduction to the department or as a service course for a broader audience inhibits change. The basic course frequently has traditional obligations to fulfill; obligations which other courses, divisions, and instructors are not anxious to accept or incorporate into their already consuming responsibilities. The traditional academic channels which proposals for significant curricular change must follow, especially if the course is required by departments and colleges outside speech communication, also inhibit change.

Few faculty members, especially in larger departments, have close contact with the basic course. Their low level of involvement and primary interests in other areas often inhibit meaningful change. If they should advocate significant changes in the basic course they are likely to be directly involved in determining and implementing those alternative approaches. It is not necessarily that departments don't care about the basic course but that, in many instances, it has such a low priority both individually and politically that it is not worth the effort or risk to attempt significant change in content or approach.

Perhaps most importantly, few departments are able to support and initiate radical changes in their approach to the basic course. Even the largest departments lack sufficient expertise and funds to implement meaningful improvements in the basic course. Approximately 75% of the teaching in the basic course is done by graduate assistants or junior faculty.[12] In many of the larger programs a junior faculty member directs the basic course and all or nearly all of the teaching is done by graduate students. The lack of faculty concern for the basic course in some such situations is only exceeded by their lack of involvement. Several administrators and faculty members have, however, become interested in one recent innovative approach to the basic course--the use of undergraduate students as teachers, advisors, and facilitators. The reason in far too many cases is painfully obvious. This approach is significantly cheaper and releases even junior faculty members and graduate students from the basic course to work in "more important areas." The faculty in many speech communication departments simply do

not see the basic course as a high priority item. Their lack of participation in the basic course and their high level of concern, interest, and commitment to other areas frequently inhibit their involvement in meaningful examination of the basic course. The departmental faculty is not, however, the only faction which stifles significant research, review and innovation.

Basic course directors consistently operate in ways which preclude significant changes in their approach to the basic course. Conformity in academic decision making has its obvious advantages--it is usually safe, it requires less effort than meaningful self-evaluation, and allows the conformists to feel they are confortably in the mainstream of approaches to academic concerns. The importance of that security ought not to be overlooked as we examine the basic course. Basic course directors and their teaching staffs, as was noted earlier, are younger and less experienced than they were a decade ago. Many course directors never intended to become basic course directors. They have no training, no experience and, in some cases, little enthusiasm for directing the basic course. Frequently they have other major responsibilities in their department including teaching other courses, advising, and committee work. In addition, they must also become productive scholars and meet traditional expectations for promotion and tenure. Directing the basic course is frequently and not unexpectedly, given these conditions, viewed as secondary to more pressing demands. It is little wonder that those individuals value conformity and stability in their basic courses.

Even if they have the motivation to look for alternative approaches to the basic course, few directors have the expertise to design,

impliment and test those approaches. Our discipline obviously cannot agree on exactly what the basic course ought to do, how it can best perform that function, or how we can adequately measure the outcomes of such instruction. The lack of significant research on the impact or effect of existing instructional approaches in the basic course is a poignant example of our current dilemma. Although Phillips was referring to speech pedagogy in a broader arena, his identification of four central research issues is especially appropriate to the basic course:

> What are legitimate learning goals and why?
>
> How can students be motivated to accept those goals?
>
> What techniques can teachers use to help students achieve those goals?
>
> How can progress toward those goals be evaluated?[13]

The sad fact is that most basic course directors don't know what to change, why to change, or how to change their approach to the basic course even if they were inclined to attempt it.

Finally, course directors are not given the tools to experiment with alternative approaches to the basic course. They are typically given the least experienced teachers in the department and little financial or professional support. Acquiring qualified staff was the third most frequently reported problem in the 1980 SCA survey, behind the directly related issues of class size and maintaining consistency of course content across sections.[14] If the teaching staff is essentially graduate students, the course director may have no control over staffing decisions. Unfortunately, as Professor Healy pointed out, "When graduate students serve as teaching assistants, the

narrow focus of their own studies can make them of little help to large groups of undergraduates."[15] These problems and others mentioned in the various surveys are of more immediate concern to the director than serious examination of the content and approach of the basic course. In fact, determining the course content and philosophy was mentioned as an issue by only six percent of the respondents to the 1980 survey.[16] Most basic course directors are in situations which simply preclude attempts at significant examination and change in their approach to the basic course. There is a third partner, in addition to the course director and departmental faculties, which plays a major role in our decisions about approaches to the basic course.

The decisions major publishing companies make about textbooks inhibit significant and innovative changes in our approaches to the basic course. Basic course textbooks can be readily divided into three categories which correspond directly to the three major content approaches identified by our surveys: the public speaking approach, the interpersonal approach, and the combination or hybrid approach. Within these broad categories, however, the differences are minimal. One text places "Listening" as Chapter III, another as Chapter VI, and other incorporates it within a chapter on "Audience." The authors paraphrase one another and none of them give us information on listening that is of much value in the classroom. Within these categories we get an unfortunate series of clones, each being careful to avoid a style or content that deviates significantly from the norm or ideal textbook. The "ideal textbook," for those of you who may be relatively new basic course directors, is that text which outsells the others in its category. Some come close and go into second and third editions. Some come too

close and are removed from the market. These are, however, examples of basic course textbooks which differ significantly in content and/or style but they generally don't reach the ten best sellers list.[17]

It would be easy and convenient to place the burden on publishers and authors but probably not fair nor realistic. All major publishing companies are in business to make a profit, not to lose money; and all authors would like to receive a decent return on the time and effort required to write a quality text. Those are realistic expectations and they have every right to minimize the risks inherent in educational publishing by staying within the guidelines established by current programs and successful textbooks.

A final related problem warrants our attention. The basic course director I have described in this paper does not have the time nor the inherent institutional reward structure to write a basic course text. Most of the basic texts which are available to us are written by individuals who have absolutely no direct day-to-day involvement with the basic course. These authors, and their publishers, must at least share the responsibility for the lack of innovative alternative approaches to the basic course. When inexperienced course directors turn to the table of contents of 8th edition of the best selling basic speech communication course textbook in the world, they have every right to expect that the topics and approaches they see emphasized are, in fact, those which we know ought to form the structure of their course. Currently, however, publishers and authors are operating on little more than educated guesses and market reactions.

The Future: How Should We Approach the Basic Course?

Many of my suggestions for examining and altering our approaches to the basic course ought to have been apparent as I discussed those factors, issues, and parties which affect current practices. They will be summarized here in the order they appeared in the text.

1. Our frequent regional and national surveys need to be more carefully constructed with a focus on the issues which directly affect various approaches to the basic course. While it may be important to know what textbooks all schools are using, what their problems are, and what percentage of time is spent on certain concepts, that information would be more valuable if it were reported within categories of size and type of educational institution. These surveys need to be able to identify significant trends before they have happened and identify important issues which affect the content and direction of the basic course.

2. The speech communication discipline and individual departments, in particular, need to reestablish their commitment to the basic course. The popular view of the basic course as a "service course" is not inherently negative, but it evidently has that connotation in too many existing situations. Senior faculty need to be actively involved in the planning and structure of the course and ought to teach it on a regular basis. Viewing it as something "less important" which graduate assistants should be teaching has become a self-fulfilling prophesy at many institutions.

3. The decisions we make about the basic course, including content, philosophy, and approach, need to be made on the basis of

valid educational goals, legitimate student needs, and solid research data. Currently, that is an infrequent occurance. We must encourage and value significant research in all areas of speech communication related to the basic course. We also need to make better use of existing research as decisions are made about approaches to the course.

4. Basic course directors should be given increased support in order to experiment with changes in their approaches to the basic course. Increased released time, professional recognition for the demands of the position, and assistance with the day-to-day demands and responsibilities would allow them to devote more of their energies to the central research questions developed earlier in this paper. Especially in the larger programs, the basic course director desperately needs additional assistance in staff training and in monitoring teaching practices.

5. Publishers and authors should be encouraged to violate the ideal textbook model and provide innovative and stimulating materials for the basic course. Scott Foresman's potential venture into videotapes for the basic course is only one example of the enormous possibilities available, especially given the resources of major publishing companies. Basic course directors and others directly involved in the basic course need to be involved in the development of such materials. There is little need for "more of the same" in the basic course textbook market.

6. We must closely examine the methods and results of alternative approaches to the basic course.[18] Journal editors should find room and provide forums to allow the reporting and comparison of these results. Various institutions should engage in cooperative research to

compare different approaches to the basic course. Regional and national communication organizations should assist in such ventures and provide additional forums for the dissemination of the results. Virtually every survey consulted in preparing this overview paraphrases Klopf's conclusion that "the basic speech course plays a major role in American education."[19] Given the nature of some of the problems identified in this overview, we have cause to wonder if such a statement might be a bit optimistic.

NOTES

[1]See, for example, the most recent national survey sponsored by the Speech Communication Association and written by Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smyth, and Hayes, "The Basic Course in Speech at U.S. Colleges and Universities: III," Communication Education, 29 (January 1980), 1-9. This document also provides an excellent bibliography of articles related to the basic speech course which were also used in preparing this overview.

[2]A conclusion reached by several of the articles reviewed and articulated clearly by Judy C. Pearson and Ritch L. Sorenson, "The Basic Speech Communication Course: A Review of Past Practices and Current Preferences," a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (66th, New York, N.Y., November 13-16, 1980). Also available through ERIC, ED 196 088.

[3]Gibson, Kline, and Gruner, "A Re-examination of the First Course in Speech at U.S. Colleges and Universities," Communication Education, 23 (September 1974), 207.

[4]Gibson (1974), 207-8.

[5]Gibson (1974), 213.

[6]Gibson (1980), 2-3.

[7]Gibson (1980), 9.

[8]Pearson and Sorenson, 4-13.

[9]Robert Greenstreet, "The Basic Course Survey: A Request for More," (1980) ERIC, ED 197 395, 10.

[10]R. Samuel Mehrley and James G. Backes, "The First Course in Speech: A Call for Revolution," Speech Teacher, 21 (September 1972), 205.

[11]Mehrley and Backes, 209.

[12]Gibson (1980), 5.

[13]Gerald Phillips, "Sources of Theory: Phillips' Response to Rubin's Response to Phillips," Communication in Instruction, A Bulletin of the CIE Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, 6 (July 1983), 4.

[14]Gibson (1980), 8.

[15]Rev. Timothy S. Healy (president of Georgetown University), "Graduate Education: The Uneasy Summit," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2 November 1983, 72.

[16]Gibson (1980), 8.

[17]Some textbooks are written with specific programs in mind and marketed beyond that program. A few textbooks actually reflect the authors' personal preferences and style and incorporate non-traditional content, examples, and applications. See Bruce E. Gronbeck's Articulate Person 2nd Ed. (Glenview: Scott Foresman and Company, 1983), for example.

[18]The three programs this paper was designed to introduce provide three excellent alternative models for us to explore (University of Nebraska, Illinois State University, and Ohio University).

[19]D.W. Klopf and R.E. Cambra, "The Basic Speech Course: University of Hawaii Style," a paper presented at the Communication Association of the Pacific (Honolulu, 1981). Also available through ERIC, ED 202 051.